The Governor's Diary Shows

By JAMES K. NESBITT

DOUGLAS no DEMOCRAT

ONE MAY EVENING in 1864 the steamer Sierra Nevada sailed out of Esquimalt Harbor.

There was more excitement than usual that night of departure. There were crowds on the dock, and many of them were distinguished people.

Sir James Douglas, just retired as governor and commander-in-chief of the Crown Colony of British Columbia and newly knighted by Queen Victoria, was sailing for Great Britain, to visit the scenes of his youth after more than 40 years in the New World.

With him were his niece, Mrs. W. A. G. Young and her husband, who had been the B.C. colonial secretary, and their children.

It was, indeed, a gala send-off.

There is no record of Lady Douglas having gone to Esquimalt to wave her husband farewell. They had bidden good-bye to each other in their home at James Bay. Lady Douglas seldom went forth on such occasions, preferring to shed her tears in the privacy of her home.

Douglas wrote in his diary: "Left home at 6 p.m. . . . drove to Esquimalt with Alice (his daughter), Good (Alice's husband), Cameron (his brother-in-law), and Bushby (his son-in-law) . . . A crowd at the steamer Sierra Nevada, Capt. Connor . . . first view saloon, not comfortable—berths (staterooms) opening into it on both sides. Plain cushioned forms with straight planked backs, running lengthwise for seats—no other furniture whatever, neither chair nor table in the place. How lucky I brought my deck chair. The saloon rather crowded (Mrs. Young overwhelmed with all her little ones around her. William, naughty man, late).

"A warm greeting and a sad parting from many sincere friends who came to say farewell. Got under way at nine—a breeze, but water smooth. Tea and toast and champagne banished grief and restored hilarity. Milk execrable. I have a cabin all to myself—Capt. Connor kindly offered me his cabin, which I declined. Retired at 10—lamp dim, could not read, bed clothes scanty in size and light. Awoke several times during the night, lost the coverings and after long groping in the dark for the sheets discovered them gathered, napkin-fashion, about my neck. Bed soft and comfortable, and contrived to get through the night without my own pillow."

In San Francisco, Douglas was taken to see the sights: ". . . Rode out with Mr. Booker to Cliff House, a remarkable place on the coast near some rocky islets, inhabited by sea lions (a large seal). The hideous noises of these monsters of the deep, and their gambols, and the surf dashing wildly on the coast attract many persons to the spot. Saw a crowd of carriages on the road and many visitors at the house. The road is good, made by private enterprise, for a toll levied on all carriages.—Dined with Mr. Berrie—excellent dinner—company rather loose——."

One cannot help but wonder what kind of a party it was that Mr. Berrie gave for the austere Sir James Douglas, then past his 60th birthday.

Douglas and Mr. and Mrs. Young crossed the Isthmus of Panama and there took ship for England.

Douglas wrote of his arrival in England: "Left Southampton by the 5 o'clock express train—London at 7 p.m. Put up at the Clarendon—the country charming, every inch cultivated like a garden. Bright green fields, sunny slopes, graceful undulations, shady groves, beautiful trees, towns and villages, farm houses, noble seats embowered in trees, laid out with an astonishing degree of good taste for man assemblage of objects that fill the mind with delight; to me it was enchanting, and as we flew over the ground in a comfortable first-class car I could not take my eyes off it for a moment. I gazed, in fact, till both eye and head ached.

"Let who will boast of the tropics; to me there is not country half so beautiful as old England in summer."

After several weeks in London Douglas started off to see England and Scotland once more.

He was impressed with York: "Explored the minster—an amazing work—the heart throbs with emotion beneath that lofty roof, supported by slender columns, and stretching into the glorious perspective of nave and choir, with the great painted window, which sheds various tints on the stone flooring, and the rich carving of the stalls."

And then up to Scotland, where he had been many times as a youth. The birthplace of Douglas is still a mystery. Historians now incline to the belief it was in the West Indies, but members of his family insist it was Lanarkshire.

In any event Douglas made a special point of visiting Lanark.

"Took the train to Glasgow—one has hopes of British Columbia after witnessing the desolate grandeur of the western Isles—I have not changed as to the superior beauty and fertility of the valley of the Clyde over all other parts of the world. My experience of today has added force to that opinion, of which I am more sensible than ever.

"Passed Perth, and arrived in the afternoon at Inchmarten, the resident of my cousin, Mrs. Ferguson Blair—estate of about 4,000 acres.

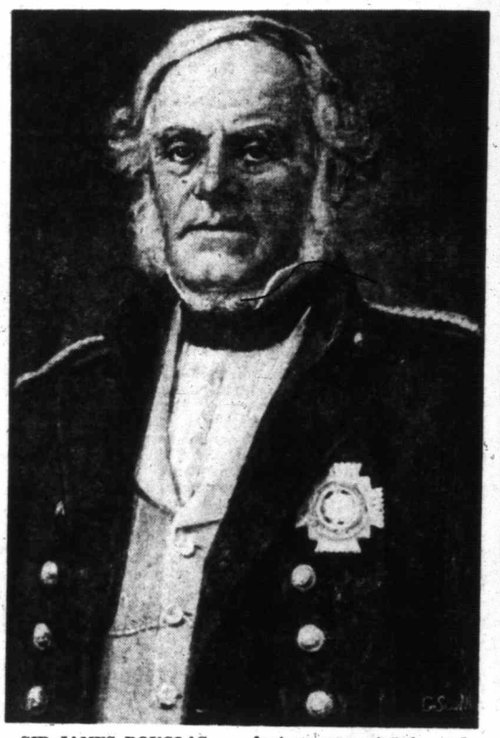
"Took the 4 o'clock train for Lanark—changed trains at Carstairs — arrived at the Clydeside—hotel most comfortable, dinner and appetite most excellent, potatoes particularly good, sherry fair.

"Lanark has grown in size, but the houses of half a century ago are still standing and not improved by age. The old people are all gone, and even their names are no more known in their once familiar haunts, and their very memory has perished—as it is with them, so it will be with us."

Douglas evidently had no idea that his name would live and grow with British Columbia, until now we have an official Douglas Day, by act of the legislature.

Douglas had a fine time in Lanark: "—Very cheerful—Mr. Gillespie's little heather-covered cottage and the manse are scarcely at all changed."

The retired governor went to the Continent: "The river (Rhine) occupies a wide channel from Mannheim to Mayence, forming numberless low, busy islands — flooded in the freshet, and unoccupied for any useful purpose and with all the wildness of the Fraser between Langley and Harrison River, the resemblance being very striking save that no high land is seen on either side of the Rhine, as far as Oppenheim."



SIR JAMES DOUGLAS . . . best government "wise and good despotism."

Douglas missed nothing: "Antwerp — people well dressed, women not so pretty as the Dutch girls of Rotterdam."

And, as he traveled, in the United States, in Great Britain, in Spain, he did not like what he found of government affairs:

"Representative government cannot be carried on without recourse, directly or indirectly, to bribery and corrupting influences. As long as a government is poor and offers no temptations to cupidity, it may retain its integrity. On the contrary, when such a goverpment with a low state of franchise, has an extensive patronage, there immediately arises a class who live on the garbage or government, or, in other words, on this patronage, and who use all their influence and eloquence among the people to secure their votes and to get this government patronage into their own hands and control.

"People do not naturally take much interest in affairs of government as long as affairs go on well and properously, and are content to leave questions of state to the ruling classes.

"Instance joint stock company—though private interests are concerned it is difficult to get a quorum or shareholders together. Men give their proxies to others to vote, according to their own judgment. So it is with men in affair of state; they take little interest in them. Demagogues rouse their passions, guide their opinions and lead the mob. Thousands of people are, from neglect, from ignorance, from following avocations which allow them little time for thought, disqualified and cannot judge rightly of profound questions of state. Parties give the tone to public opinion and receive these opinions from the leaders of those parties who really govern states. The best form of government, if attainable, is that of a wise and good despotism."

Federal government archivist Dr. W. Kaye Lamb, after reading this, summed up: "There is no escaping the conclusion that Sir James was not a democrat—democracy appealed as little to him in Great Britain as it did in Spain."

This was the Douglas home in old Victoria, where his family was raised. But oddly, there is some doubt as to Sir James' own birthplace.